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ABSTRACT

A cooperative effort by the Teacher Corps, the University of West Florida, the Okaloosa School District Teacher Center and community members resulted in a graduate program for 34 elementary and secondary teachers at a rural school. This program was created after a self-study of a local school and the surrounding community indicated that school community cooperation, student motivation, student performance, and discipline policies could be improved. The two-year academic program was designed to provide experiences and activities through three major avenues: (1) core courses in such areas as multicultural education and classroom management; (2) seminars or independent study geared to individual needs; and (3) action research pr ects conducted around an individual's chosen area of speci ization. The core courses were completed during the first year, after which participants identified specific areas of community, school, classroom, and personal needs to be studied. University advisors provided group instruction and assistance in action research skills. A research seminar was held during the first year to refine the participants' organization and strategy skills through group discussion. Forty completed projects were presented by the researchers at a colloquium, an event that will occur annually in an effort to motivate and institutionalize classroom research. (FG)

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PROMOTING CLASSROOM TEACHER RESEARCH

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Classroom teachers have generally taken a dim view of the practicality of educational research. To most, it is an undertaking that someone, somewhere else, does. Teacher educators have long been concerned about how to involve classroom teachers in practical research and to make use of the results of other's research. This report presents the strategies and results of an organized effort by teacher educators at The University of West Florida to encourage the faculty and the community of a rural school to attack classroom, school and community problems through research.

The Setting

This effort took place in the Baker School (K-12) in Baker, Florida. Baker, Florida is located in the rural northern section of Okaloosa County, Florida. Okaloosa County is located in the northwestern section of the Florida Panhandle bordering the southern boundary of Alabama and extending to the Gulf of Mexico. The University of West Florida, which is located at the western tip of the panhandle, serves the higher education needs of the entire panhandle area.

Increased concern for quality education within the Baker School communities and within the school district focused attention on the discrepancy between education opportunities in this northern

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rural community and those which were available in the southern portions of the county where major military bases had previously influenced educational growth. Community and teacher morale was at a low ebb, paralleling poor pupil performance as evidenced by state and local test scores.

Through the auspices of a Teacher Corps Project, The University of West Florida joined the Okaloosa District Teacher Center in targeting the Baker School as an area warranting special efforts. Thirty-four Baker teachers and community members were selected to enter a field-based graduate program designed to improve the quality of instruction and to help the school meet targeted needs. A university team worked with county and school officials and members of the newly formed Community Council to plan activities, programs and graduate courses which would prepare the faculty and community to attack their own problems. A two-year graduate program was implemented at Baker School. In addition to performing traditional course assignments, participants met course objectives by directing a comprehensive school/community self-study, by organizing the school curriculum (scope and sequence), and by planning and implementing research aimed at meeting school and community needs.

School and Community Needs

The project staff organized a group of students, faculty, and community members to design and implement a school and community self-study. This study resulted in the identification of the common concerns and aspirations of the group and in hard data relative to

the performance of students in meeting county goals, state assessment standards and national norms. It was concluded that school/community cooperation was less than desired; pre-school entry performance was below expected norms; general student motivation for learning was low; teacher expectation for student performance was equally low; classroom and school discipline was generally weak; student academic performance on standardized tests was lowest in the county; and student and community aspirations for the future were limited.

Program Implementation

The project director worked with assigned university staff to design a graduate program which would upgrade knowledge and skills and promote improvement in the targeted areas of concern. Appropriate University committees approved the program for delivery at the school site. Qualified site teachers and community members were encouraged to enroll in the program. Personal needs assessments of these people were made to determine group and individual needs and general course plans were developed.

Over the two-year period students (teachers and community members) met as a group for regular classes scheduled two afternoons a week immediately following the dismissal of school. Additionally, seminars, directed studies and planned university-based classes (Summer 1980) were planned to meet specific needs of individuals. Special classes were organized as new needs emerged. Over the two year period, nine university faculty members were assigned,

periodically, to provide special assistance to individuals during the regular school day.

Academic Work

The academic program was designed to provide experiences and activities through three major avenues: core courses, seminars/independent study, and an area of specialization which included an action research project. The core courses consisted of Curriculum Development, Multicultural Education, Classroom Management, and Advanced Teaching Skills. Topics for seminars/independent studies were as numerous as were individual's needs and consisted of such studies as: Values Education, Parent Involvement, Evaluation Techniques, Improving Math Skills, Improving Reading Skills, Language Arts and Literature, Learning Centers, Instructional Materials, Action Research Designs, Observational Techniques, Special Needs of Children, and Multi Media Instruction. Specialization areas ranged from subject matter content to teaching/learning strategies and processes. Within each area of specialization, the action research projects were designed.

All core course work was completed during the initial year of the program. During these courses the group acquired general skills and determined individual needs, student needs, and teaching/learning needs. Seminars/independent studies began during the first year as participants identified needs and problems to be resolved.

By the end of the first year, and with the identification of individual needs, participants enrolled in courses, seminars and

independent studies on the university campus. This time was provided in the degree plan to allow for: 1) increased individualization, 2) exposure to a wider range of graduate students and university faculty, and 3) greater utilization of the university resources.

By the beginning of the second year, individual and small groups had determined the specific areas of school, classroom and personal needs to be studied. Again, specific seminars/directed studies were formulated and faculty research advisors were assigned. These advisors directed and encouraged individuals in acquiring skills needed in preparing and implementing individual specialization projects identified as Action Research. All projects were aimed at solving previously identified personal, classroom, school, and/or community problems.

The Prospectus

Participants were given group instruction and assistance in preparing themselves for action research. An "Action Research Prospectus" was prepared by each degree program participant and was approved by the research advisor, the school principal, and the project director. Guidelines for preparation of the prospectus required students to: 1) define their problem in an attackable form, 2) outline the procedures suggested for solution of the problem, 3) identify the references and resources they would need, 4) establish the timeline they would follow to implement their project, and 5) select the strategies and tests required to assess their progress results. Once the prospectus was approved,

participants were encouraged to provide progress reports and to meet regularly with their research advisor.

The Research Seminar

A research seminar was held during the first term of the second year to provide participants with personal and group assistance in organizing and planning research strategies. Each participant presented plans and reacted to others' comments and suggestions. This seminar encouraged participants to carefully analyze and clearly communicate their plans. Group members were encouraged to question the reasoning behind each other's plans, to suggest "better" ways, and to anticipate problems and/or outcomes based on their knowledge of specific situations. These activities both sharpened individual thinking and promoted collective understanding of the roles each was playing in attempting to meet school and community needs.

Nature of the Research

The nature of each individual's research varied with the specific needs of the individual in his/her work setting. Those whose work settings were outside of the target school were related to improving community and parental involvement in the education of youth and community members. One project sought to increase attendance at school-community meetings and to bring community resources into the school in a manner that would increase pupil awareness of the community and pupil understanding of future job possibilities. Another project sought to bring the parents of preschool age children into training sessions for ways to improve parenting and school readiness.

The Majority of projects were related to improving pupil performance in academic skills (reading and writing), values clarification, personal and group problem solving, concept development, and cultural awareness. Some participants utilized materials and strategies that had been evaluated and reported upon in the educational literature. Others designed, implemented and evaluated strategies and materials to solve specific problems for which no answers had been previously researched.

The Results

In most projects, pupil- and community-targeted performance did improve as measured by the strategies and tests applied. In some areas devised outcomes were not achieved. Most importantly, these new researchers took pride in what they were attempting. Immediate failures were viewed as an indication that new or different strategies or materials would be needed in the future. Research was viewed as very practical and, more importantly, attackable by teachers. This reaction is in direct contrast with the feelings expressed by these teachers prior to their personal involvement in research.

Incentive and Dissemination

All graduate degree participants became involved in performing action research. Ten quarter hours of academic credit was awarded to those who successfully completed projects. As a final product each project was described in an abbreviated thesis format and the individual results were presented by each researcher at a Colloquium

at The University of West Florida, June 4, 1981. Several additional West Florida educators and community members, not in the Teacher Corps project, also were invited to present their research at the Colloquium. Forty different presentations were made during the day. The Colloquium will become an annual event sponsored by the Educational Research and Development Center of The University of West Florida. It is hoped that the Colloquium will continue to motivate classroom teacher research.

Institutionalization

A major goal of Teacher Corps projects is the institutionalization of good ideas generated within projects. Two major ideas generated in this project warrant consideration. First: Field-based, problem(s) oriented, graduate programs can meet the test of academic credibility at least equivalent to university-based programs. Additionally, field-based programs can meet the challenge for relevancy facing teacher educators in ways that few university-based programs have done. Second: Teachers can be encouraged and assisted in utilizing and performing research relevant to their needs.

Needed Ingredients

The ingredients needed to involve teachers in research are: a commitment on the part of teacher educators to emphasize practical research skills; willingness to assist graduate students individually; organizational and financial support of county and school administrators; some form of tangible or intangible reward for attempting to solve problems; and a peer teacher support base.

Conclusion

Teacher educators can design and implement graduate degree programs which recognize the importance of research done by classroom teachers and can support and assist classroom teachers in conducting such research. When classroom teachers do research relative to their classroom, school and community problems, they see its value and relevance.